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ABSTRACT

Ethnography is a research approach that seeks to understand and represent the points of view of the members of a particular culture. As in other forms of qualitative research, the data collected are rich in their descriptions of people, places, languages, and events. Ethnographic research can be characterized by its multi-instrumental approach, utilizing such tools as participant observation, notetaking, audio- or videotaping, interviewing informants and compiling biographical data on them, collecting genealogies and life histories, taking photographs or making films, administering questionnaires or surveys, and eliciting ratings and rankings. Teachers, administrators, or researchers seeking to design workplace literacy programs can learn about the home, school, and community contexts of their clients by using some of the techniques described above. Research has shown that ethnographic methods have proven to be highly successful for providing insights into adult literacy students' school, work, home, and community experiences. Such information can be invaluable in the design of training and educational programs for nonnative employees. Investigation of the different domains in which the literacy activities of adult English-as-a-Second-Language workers take place can highlight the wide range of activities that involve reading and writing. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (VWL)

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

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Many researchers recommend that, to serve students' interests, teachers consider the social dynamics in both the classroom and the communities of which the students are part. Heath (1983), for example, did not draw sharp distinctions between what occurred inside and outside the school walls in her study of learning in the Carolina Piedmonts, but rather gave detailed, integrated accounts of both the communities and the schools she examined. Freire (1973), who has worked extensively with literacy programs in developing countries, advocates learning about the lives of the students prior to beginning instruction.

In order to gain as broad a picture as possible of the students being served, many researchers have employed ethnographic methods. Educators, too, have discovered that ethnographic tools, which are part of qualitative research, can be useful for examining learning processes and the transmission of culture in the home, school, and community.

The Ethnographic Method

Ethnography, which seeks to understand and represent the points of view of the members of a particular culture, is a primary approach to data collection and analysis in anthropology. As in other forms of qualitative research, the data collected are rich in their descriptions of people, places, languages, and events. Ethnographers conduct extensive fieldwork during which they listen carefully to what people say, directly observe their behavior, and study the products of their behavior. Their goal is to make detailed observations of behavior with a minimal amount of distortion and ethnocentric bias.

This classic anthropological method has been used successfully by various researchers in education. For example, authors in Cazden, Hymes, and John (1972) used ethnographic methods to explore the social functions of language use in the classroom. Erickson and Mohatt (1982) used direct observation, videotaping, and interviews to study the organization of social relationships in two classrooms of culturally similar children (Odawa and Ojibwa, in Northern Ontario) whose teachers had different cultural backgrounds from theirs.

The Ethnographer's Tools

Ethnographic research can be characterized by its multi-instrumental approach. A cornerstone of ethnographic methodology is participant observation, in which the observer becomes part of the community being studied in order to understand the subjects' point of view. Many ethnographers spend years living and working as participant observers in the communities they study. Michael Armstrong (1980), for example, spent an entire school year observing and teaching children in a British primary school class to study "intellectual growth and its enabling conditions" (p.13). His book, *Closely observed children*, is a meticulous account of what he observed. Heath (1983) spent several years examining the literacy tasks that people in three communities in the Carolina Piedmonts routinely encountered. This helped her to understand their use of oral and written language and how that use might influence classroom practices.

In addition to participant observation, with extensive note taking and possibly audio- or videotaping, data gathering techniques include interviewing informants and compiling biographical data on them, collecting genealogies and life histories, taking photographs or making films, administering questionnaires or surveys, and eliciting ratings and rankings. These and other forms of instrumentation assist the ethnographer in attaining a holistic view of the culture studied.

Since ethnographers do not set out to test pre-established hypotheses but instead try to describe all aspects of the community they are studying in the greatest detail possible, they structure and refine their research as they proceed. Thus, the collection and analysis of data affect the design of the research.

Using Ethnographic Tools in Designing Workplace Literacy Programs

Teachers, administrators, or researchers seeking to design workplace literacy programs sensitive to their learners' needs do not need to spend years collecting data and conducting full-blown ethnographic studies. Instead, they can learn a tremendous amount about the home, school, and community contexts of their clients by using some of the ethnographic techniques described above. For example, in a study of the on-the-job reading practices of 42 service and clerical workers of the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company in Washington, DC, Kirsch and Guthrie (1982) found that the amount of time workers spent engaged in various types of reading activities significantly predicted their performance on related tasks.

Kirsch and Guthrie's findings are consistent with other ethnographic research which has shown that workers can and do acquire competencies to meet their particular occupational and personal needs. Sticht (1982), for example, found that people can enhance their ability to perform particular types of reading tasks at work, even though they may not make gains in what he terms "general" reading. Marginally literate adults enrolled in a job-related reading program made approximately twice the gains in performance on job-related reading tasks than they did on standardized reading tests, which measured generalized reading ability.

Through ethnographic approaches, including participant observation, questionnaires, and interviews, Castaldi (1989) found

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that union employees, including both native and non-native speakers of English enrolled in degree programs, experienced significant overlap among their worlds of work, school, and family. Their success with school-based writing was closely correlated with the ways they used writing in their jobs. For example, union secretaries who regularly cut out and highlighted newspaper articles for their employers used these newspapers as models for their essay writing in college. Thus, through their work activities, these women learned to construct their academic writing. As a result of this study, classroom teachers and administrators began to examine closely the working backgrounds of their students before planning course curricula.

Shore and Platt (1984) found that cultural and social factors played a large role in Samoan immigrants' adaptation to the American workplace. The high value placed on human relations within the Samoan community radically differed from employers' expectations of punctuality and consistent attendance on the job. Also, young Samoans, who acted in a submissive manner in the presence of older adults, did not communicate well in interviews conducted by older employees, especially when asked questions about their personal achievements. Samoans of all ages acted as if they had understood directions when in fact they had not, so complex orders were often misunderstood. Finally, the Samoans studied were accustomed to hands-on educational experiences, so that abstract "blackboard explanations" given in class were confusing and alienating. These findings have profound implications for both the workplace and the design of worker education programs for these individuals.

Conclusions and Applications

As shown above, ethnographic methods have proven to be highly successful for providing insights into adult literacy students' school, work, home, and community experiences. This information can be invaluable in the design of training and educational programs for both American-born and nonnative employees.

It has been argued by some that good ethnographic analysis can be conducted only by those who have received substantial training in this social science research strategy (Feinberg, 1977); there may also be those who believe that they are ill-prepared to begin an ethnographic study of a classroom or student body. However, an observant, skilled teacher, administrator, or employer can successfully use many of the techniques employed by the ethnographic researcher (Castaldi, 1989; Passmore, 1981).

For example, if a class is small, the teacher could hold individual interviews with learners at the beginning of the course to elicit information about their educational and employment backgrounds and the current demands of their jobs. A teacher could construct and distribute a basic questionnaire that asks learners to elaborate on their previous classroom experiences, if any, and on the types of reading and writing they do on the job and at home. This questionnaire could also ask learners to describe the work they do and note the connection between their job responsibilities and course requirements. If the class is held at the workplace itself, the teacher should examine firsthand the types of routine, on-the-job tasks learners are involved in and design course assignments accordingly.

Inquiry into the types of skills learners use in their homes and at work can shed light on their performance in the classroom. Conversely, exploration of the dynamics and demands of the classroom can illuminate its influence upon the workplace and home environments. For example, an employer might investigate whether particular skills are best learned on the job or in a classroom environment. Whatever the case, the interests of the students are served by considering both the classroom and the communities of which learners are part.

In summary, the use of ethnographic methods in the design of adult workplace literacy programs allows a clearer understanding of a particular population and places literacy learning in the context of the social practices that promote or inhibit it. Investigation of the different domains in which the literacy activities of adult ESL workers take place—home, community, school, and workplace—can highlight the wide range of activities that involve reading and writing. It can provide those who help to prepare ESL adults for the workplace with a far richer view of the expansive world of literacy in which those adults participate.

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